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Who Speaks for the Past? Social Media, Social Memory, and the Production of Historical Knowledge in Contemporary China

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This study explores the influence of social media on the (re)formation of social memory and the production of historical knowledge in society. It takes several contested debates over historical events and figures on Weibo, one of the most widely used social media, as the case to investigate how social media enable people to articulate previously unspoken experiences and memories, question the authenticity and accuracy of official history, and shape social recollection in China. This study argues that social media embrace a wide variety of diverse individuals as subjects who contribute to various mnemonic practices, facilitate the crowdsourcing and aggregation of alternative or counternarratives of the past, and cultivate the production of historical knowledge as a retrievable and reactivatable process. The contestation facilitated by social media over mnemonic knowledge transcends what happened in history and memory and sheds light on the complex political and cultural contentions in contemporary China.

Keywords: social media, social memory, historical knowledge, countermemory, China

> Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.
> —George Orwell, *1984*

On July 24, 2015, Chinese officials named a new monthly magazine *Lei Feng* in honor of the exemplary soldier who was widely popular in the 1960s. Particularly, the magazine aims to refute the argument against the authenticity of the stories of Lei Feng on the Internet (Yuen, 2015). The release of the magazine was not a singular event. It was part of a full-scale national propaganda campaign initiated by the Chinese authorities to "rectify the names of the heroes" by rebutting "rumors" against the authenticity of some long-revered Communist heroes and by quashing doubts over the accuracy of their stories on the Internet (Ni, 2015). Key official news organizations, including Xinhua News Agency and *People's Daily*, are all engaging in the campaign. with a cascade of reports responding to widespread

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skepticism about the stories of the heroes and growing cynicism toward these stories on Weibo, the Chinese social media platform (e.g., Chen & Tan, 2015; X. Liu, 2015).

These events exemplify a relevant but less frequently investigated and perhaps inadequately understood political influence of social media in contemporary China: Apart from its affordance as a means of facilitating protests in contemporary contentions (e.g., Huang & Sun, 2014; Tong & Zuo, 2014), social media also aid the emergence, dissemination, and understanding of disagreements about contested historical information, which challenge the authorized knowledge of the past and forces the authorities to respond to this information. Put differently, with a strong preference for contention centering on contemporary events, existing scholarship overlooks the impact of social media on the (re)construction of historical knowledge.

This study aims to fill this gap by scrutinizing the influence of social media—Weibo in this case—on the social memory and the production of historical knowledge in contemporary China. It investigates how people use Weibo as a platform to interrogate the official knowledge of the past, articulate individual memories, and reconstruct social memory, all of which shape the production of historical knowledge in society. I first provide a critical review of current studies on digital media—social media in particular—and politics in China, addressing the relevance of approaching such a topic from a long-term perspective. In this case, social memory acts as an example of historical knowledge. Second, I introduce a theoretical framework for social media, social memory, and the production of historical knowledge, with a focus on social media as "technologies of memory" (Armstrong & Crage, 2006, p. 745) in the process of (re)constructing memory and commemorative practices. Third, I elaborate my methodology, and follow this with an overview of selected cases on Weibo—several contested debates over this historical event (i.e., "the Three Years of Great Chinese Famine" [hereafter "the Great Famine"]; see J. Yang, 2012) and historical figures in the Mao era, such as Lei Feng, Huang Jiguang, and Qiu Shaoyun, who were once national role models but are now controversial figures on Weibo. Fourth, I dissect how people use Weibo not only to question and satirize the official discourse regarding this event and these figures, but also to articulate and disseminate alternative historical stories and counternarratives of the past that the public had previously never been allowed to know. I argue that the articulation, accumulation, and dissemination of experiences, memories, dissensions, and incredulities on Weibo engender alternative mechanisms of the production of historical knowledge and establish "countermemory" (Foucault, 1980) that contends against the official framework of remembrance, reshaping the social memory of the past and thereby generating a long-term political impact on society. I conclude with thoughts on the political implications of Weibo on the (re)construction of social memory and the mechanisms of the production of historical knowledge in contemporary China.

Digital Media and Politics in Contemporary China: A Critical Review

The impact of digital media on politics has emerged as a substantial focus in the study of information and communication technologies in contemporary China (e.g., Esarey & Xiao, 2011; G. Yang, 2009). A number of thorough studies have discussed the increasingly prominent role of digital media in contemporary political contention in the processes of information distribution, claims-making, network-

bridging, repertoire diversification, and movement collaboration and mobilization (e.g., Huang & Sun, 2014; Tong & Zuo, 2014; G. Yang, 2009).

Nevertheless, current scholarship remains largely dominated by case studies of contention around current issues, be they environmental issues, social injustice, or major accidents (e.g., Tong & Zuo, 2014; G. Yang, 2009). Such a focus presents a far too restricted view of politics, one that privileges sporadic—or "short-lived" (Tong & Zuo, 2014, p. 69)—confrontations around contemporary events (but see L. Yang, 2010; Zhang, 2012). As studies have shown, first, the use of digital media not only shapes the unfolding of current events, it also affects the way in and through which people express, interpret, negotiate, and archive the past (e.g., Keightley & Schlesinger, 2014; Neiger, Meyers, & Zandberg, 2011; van Dijck, 2007). Second, the current approach fails to provide a comprehensive picture of structural change that has been introduced by the integration of information and communication technologies into Chinese life. Consequently, it is unable to recognize the long-term or "gradual revolution" introduced by the imprints, or cumulative effects, of digital media on politics in Chinese society (G. Yang, 2011, p. 1045). To advance understanding of these issues, this study proposes to broaden the scope of interrogation by taking social memory as a crucial topic to expound possible, long-term social and cultural changes introduced by digital media in contemporary China.

Social Memory in Social Media: A Research Agenda

In his work *On Collective Memory*, Halbwachs (1992) establishes a foundational framework for the study of societal remembrance. As "a socially constructed notion" (Coser, 1992, p. 22), collective memory represents a society's understanding of its past, defines the relationship between the individual and society, and enables a community to preserve its self-image and to transfer it through time.

However, as Halbwachs (1992) explicates, "collective memory must be *distinguished from* [emphasis added] history" (p. 222). Instead, it is "essentially a *reconstruction* [emphasis added] of the past in the light of the present" (Coser, 1992, p. 34; also see Bodnar, 1994; Jansen, 2007; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). In other words, the concern and structure of the present determine the selective perception of history, and the past is accordingly "shaped by the concerns of the present" (Coser, 1992, p. 22; also see Bond & Gilliam, 1994). In this process, for individuals, their memories are de facto a manipulated construction of those who maintain power and status and who supervise the images of the past. Halbwachs (chapter 1) underlines the key role of the "social frameworks for memory," within which individuals localize, organize, and remember commemorative events in mnemonic landscapes. This process consequently reinforces officially sanctioned collective memory.

In the following decades, later scholars advanced Halbwachs' (1992) work in various ways, in particular, elucidating the relation among power, counterpower, and the (re)construction of memory. Some assert that the representations of collective memory are those that have been specifically selected by people in power, aiming to ensure the legitimacy of dominance, the reproduction of the status quo, and the consolidation of existing power (e.g., Alonso, 1988; Armstrong & Crage, 2006; Bodnar, 1994; Boyarin, 1994; Nora, 1996). Others maintain that collective memory is a process that is constantly unfolding, appropriating, and transforming in a "dynamic and unexpected" way (Steiner & Zelizer, 1995, p. 221; also

see Jansen, 2007; Zarecka, 1994). Social, political, and cultural factors engage in the negotiation of memory—or "the politics of memory" (Jansen, 2007, p. 959)—in which different narratives compete for a place in the reconstruction of the past (Sturken, 1997; also see Brockmeier, 2002; Zandberg, 2010). In this sense, the memorial presence of the past becomes both a tool and an object of power subject to contestation, appropriation, and transformation at different points in time.

One particularly vibrant area of discussion concerning this kind of memory negotiation and contestation emerges from Foucault's (1980) notion of *countermemory*, which refers to memories that run different from, and often counter to, the official (frameworks of) history. Countermemory involves the memorialization—the politics of mnemonic practices—of forgotten, suppressed, or excluded histories as a crucial way of resisting oppression and dominant ideologies (Berdahl, 1999; Brown, 2010; Esbenshade, 1995; Medina, 2011). As Foucault (1995) argues, power and domination define what knowledge is and what it should be, as well as its boundaries; they also disqualify illegitimate forms of knowledge that they consider unacceptable. Following his argument, on the one hand, mechanisms of power and domination control and produce different types of historical knowledge—as "social frameworks for memory" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 34)—which guide, mold, and restrain people's acts of memorialization and reinforce exercises of power. In this way, "power and memory are most intimately embraced in the representations of official histories which are central to the production and reproduction of hegemony" (Alonso, 1988, p. 50). On the other hand, as "oppositional knowledge-production" (Gutman, 2015), countermemory promotes the production, dissemination, and consolidation of alternative understandings and interpretations of the past from the dominant ones (Brown, 2010; Gutman, 2015). Memory contestation thus epitomizes the struggle between the dominant and the subordinate in a society and influences the production of historical knowledge. This process crystallizes the relevance of mnemonic capacity, or "the skills and resources need[ed] to create commemorative vehicles" (Armstrong & Crage, 2006, p. 726), to nonstate actors for the emergence of new—albeit not essentially counter—memorials that shape what societies know about their pasts.

Among many factors, ICTs emerge as "technologies of memory" (Armstrong & Crage, 2006, p. 745) in the process of formatting, reconstructing, and mediating memory and commemorative practices (e.g., Haskins, 2007; Hess, 2007; Neiger et al., 2011; van Dijck, 2007). Given its technological affordances such as openness, accessibility, availability, and interactivity, social media not only enable but also encourage alternative and counterhistorical narratives to emerge and proliferate from the ordinary against official versions of history (e.g., Amazeen, 2014; Reading, 2003). This process significantly affects the production of knowledge of the past. In the case of China, few studies note that digital media, including virtual museums and bulletin board systems, allow people to engage in the (counter)narrative of localized histories and personal stories about, for instance, memories of the Cultural Revolution (CR; L. Yang, 2010; Zhang, 2012), contributing to "the opening of China's political spaces" (G. Yang, 2005, p. 33).

Existing studies, however, give less attention to the emerging role of Weibo in constructing the memorial presence of the past. With more than one third of the Chinese Internet population as its users (i.e., 242 million), Weibo has emerged as the most popular social media platform in China. More than 126 million active daily users (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2016, p. 30) have established Weibo as a vibrant, contested, and high-visibility space in which people express and share

opinions on political issues, disclose and criticize government malfeasance, and mobilize and coordinate political action even "before authorities and censors c[an] react" (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Jin, 2012, p. 348). Meanwhile, the authorities are struggling to keep Weibo under effective control (e.g., Sullivan, 2014). More important, Weibo entails a highly interactive environment with a low threshold of participation. Discussions and retweets help topics to quickly peak or "trend" to receive large-scale attention (Yu, Asur, & Huberman, 2015). The accessibility of microblogging on Weibo via both website and mobile app reduces inequalities in access. Interaction on Weibo unfolds in an informal, conversational way, instead of a careful deliberation as happens when writing weblogs, and this easy and casual pace encourages various modes of public engagement over a broad range of topics.

To fill this gap, this study explores the role of Weibo in (re)shaping social memory in contemporary China. Following Olick and Robbins' (1998) suggestion, I use the term *social memory*, which involves "distinct sets of mnemonic practices in various social sites" (p. 112), as this inclusive definition allows us to observe a wide variety of mnemonic activities in society. Moreover, according to Swidler and Arditi (as cited in Olick & Robbins, 1998), social memory studies should move toward "structures of knowledge or consciousness that shape the thinking of laypersons" (p. 108). Exploring ordinary people's mnemonic practices thereby allows us to detect and reveal potential structural changes in both commemoration and the broader society. In this sense, I asked the following research questions:

RQ1: What kinds of narratives of the past have been articulated and circulated and who has been circulating them on Weibo?

RQ2: How are the narratives found on Weibo different from the official narrative or the dominant social framework for memory?

RQ3: How and to what extent do the narratives of the past on Weibo challenge or change social memory and further affect the production of historical knowledge in the long run?

Method

I used a case study design (Yin, 2014) to look into the acts of memorialization on Weibo, in particular, how Weibo articulates (the query about) the narrative of the past and the ways in which it shapes social memory through these acts. Cases were drawn from high-profile contestations of historical events and figures in the Mao era on Weibo, including the debate over the Great Famine (Zhao & Liu, 2015) as well as the debate over historical figures such as Lei Feng, Dong Cunrui, Huang Jiguang, and Qiu Shaoyun, who were once national role models or national martyrs but are now controversial figures on the Internet (e.g., Cao, 2015; Li, 2015; "State Media Play Good Cop/Bad Cop," 2015). Gaining widespread attention in society, the cases entail both "critical" and "revelatory" characterizations that offer insights into underexplored phenomena and help "refocus future investigations" (Yin, 2014, pp. 51–52). The cases are presented in the next section.

I present data collected through participant observation and immersion (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, Chapter 5) in the cases on Weibo. In the case of the Great Famine, for several

continuous hours with sustained attention I observed the start of the debate, monitoring the nuances and changes within the debates and the critical developments throughout the whole process,[2] taking field notes about how Weibo users interacted with each other and discussed the issues, and recording—sometimes taking screenshots of—tweets in the debate hour by hour. The specific duration of participant observation lasted from 11:00 to 16:00 (CET), corresponding to the peak times for Weibo use (i.e., 18:00–23:00 in China; CNNIC, 2016, p. 30). I also gathered the tweets and postings by doing keyword searches (including *Zhibo Lin*, *the Great Famine*, *the Three Years of Natural Disasters*, and *the Three Years of Economic Difficulty* in the case of the Great Famine and the names of the figures in the remaining cases) on Weibo. I also marked the original and relevant tweets as favorites (e.g., those by Weibo celebrities) and, by following hashtags, such as #theGreatFamine, received and retrieved the latest tweets under the hashtags even after the debates and discussions had closed. The tweet corpus included 655 tweets. I further collected information from publications and media reports about the debates on the cases as objects of analysis (e.g., Cao, 2015; "Doubts," 2015; Li, 2015; M. Liu, 2012; X. Liu, 2015; Ni, 2015).

With the heuristic purpose of theoretical exploration (Vaughan, 1992), I conducted an analysis of data from Weibo and traditional media. To work with participant observation data from Weibo, I followed the guideline from Boellstorff et al. (2012, pp. 168–179): Two researchers read the tweets independently, looked for thematic elements, categorized them, integrated field notes into the analysis, and highlighted key phrases and statements to identify explanations inductively that illuminated the research questions. With the explorative nature of the study, the focus was to develop detailed analytical narratives of these cases, interpreting various mnemonic practices on Weibo through which people engaged the narratives of the past, in particular. It is necessary to point out that the cases, all coming from the historical events and figures in Mao's era, may not be interpreted strictly as a representative sampling of the historical narrative on Weibo. Nevertheless, the cases still highlight issues of special relevance for an understanding of the long-term influence of Weibo on social memory beyond a simple realization of sporadic contentious possibility.

Debating Historical Events and Figures in the Mao Era on Weibo: The Cases

This section presents a description of the cases (i.e., the debates covering two types of historical narratives, memories, and descriptions of the past): One focuses on a historical event (the Great Famine). The other discusses famous historical figures from the Mao era. Sample tweets have been drawn randomly

[2] The main debate over the Great Famine lasted from April 29 to May 2, 2012. The discussions on Lei Feng started early March with the annual "Learn From Lei Feng Day" (March 5) and lasted three to four weeks. In April 2013, the debate was galvanized by Weibo celebrity Qinhuohuo's (nickname) tweet. The discussions on Qiu Shaoyun were initiated at the end of October 2012, but went viral after Zuoyeben (nickname), a Weibo celebrity with more than 8.7 million followers, posted a tweet joking about Qiu's heroic self-sacrifice, saying, "Because Qiu Shaoyun was lying in the fire and didn't move, diners refused to pay for the half-done and half-rare barbeque and preferred roasted Lai Ning (a teenager who died in a forest fire in the late 1980s)" (Sun, 2013). On April, 16, 2015, the discussion was again provoked by a tweet from Zuoyeben (11:28). The debates and doubts over Dong Cunrui and Huang Jiguang proliferated in July 2015 on Weibo (see "Doubts," 2015).

from the data collected. In general, the debate demonstrates a distinct disjunction and disarticulation between individual narratives and memories and the authorized narratives and frameworks of the past.

The Debate Over the Great Famine

The debate over the Great Famine was triggered by Lin Zhibo, the head of the Gansu Province branch of the *People's Daily*, the mouthpiece newspaper of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Having a verified account and more than 230,000 Weibo followers, on April 29, 2012, Lin questioned the multimillion death toll between 1960 and 1962. He asserted that the number was a conspiracy "to defile Chairman Mao by utilizing the exaggerated slander of millions of people dying of starvation."[3]

Lin's tweet quickly ignited outrage among Weibo users, with criticism directed toward his denial of the starvation and deaths of millions in the early 1960s. The tweet had been retweeted over 7,000 times within four hours of being published, with the original one receiving more than 5,000 comments, most of which were scorching critiques. Apart from criticism of Lin, numerous Weibo users started to explore and distribute various kinds of historical materials that demonstrated conclusively that millions of deaths occurred in the early 1960s because of the famine, which has long been a politically taboo topic (Branigan, 2013) in China. These materials included, among others, previously hard-to-access CPC archives and documents, rarely seen government statistics, banned or censored works and documentary films, and, in particular, long-forgotten personal memoirs, stories, and shared memories about that period. For instance,

> @Kai-fu Lee: In 1960, my grandma died of hunger. My uncle and his two kids passed away in those years. [I am] not sure if the reason was starvation, but their deaths definitely had something to do with the environment of that time. (Lee, 2012)

> @Bei Dafei (Weibo nickname): My parents' hometown is located in the northern part of Suzhou city. I called them and asked whether there were people who died of hunger during the Great Famine. My father said that one hungry cousin came to visit his neighbor for something to eat. However, the neighbor did not have extra food to give him. After a few days, the cousin died of hunger. My mother said that quite a few children ate too much potherb and were poisoned to death, including the little daughter of her high school headmaster. (see more from Xue, 2012)

The various mnemonic activities related to the exploration of the Great Famine on Weibo articulated a contrapuntal memory of the period against the official one that never admitted that the famine actually happened, fundamentally contributing to the process of recognition and reconstruction of the social memory of the famine. For instance, an online survey after the debate, with more than 12,000 Weibo users participating, demonstrated that seven of 10 participants believed the conclusion that 30 million people—or even more—starved to death over the three years of 1959–1960, which is quite a bit more than the official narrative, which reported that approximately 10 million died (Zhao & Liu, 2015, p.

[3] For Lin's tweet, see Zhao and Liu (2015, p. 43).

48). In this process, the term *the Great Famine*, which calls for reflection on the famine as a political calamity that was "born [out] of the system of totalitarianism" (Mirsky, 2012, p. BR22), is gradually taking the place of the ones from the authorities that attribute millions of deaths by starvation to either natural disasters or the Soviet Union's treachery (History Section of People's Education Press, 2003, pp. 109–110).

The Debates Over Historical Figures on Weibo

The debates over historical figures on Weibo include doubts about their actual existence or details in their biographies, accusations that these so-called heroes were actually corrupt and profligate, and cynicism toward the official narratives of their heroism. The debate over Lei Feng—an iconic Mao-era soldier who exemplified unswerving devotion to communist ideology and fanatic loyalty to the leader of the CPC ("Lei Feng," 2011)—fermented on Weibo at the beginning of March 2012, around the time that the government commemorates Lei Feng with the annual "Learn From Lei Feng Day" on March 5, a holiday initiated by Mao Zedong in 1962. The government's effort to exalt and resuscitate the unconditional self-sacrifice and obedient patriotism of Lei Feng, however, has evoked unprecedented controversy, criticism, incredulity, and cynicism toward the authenticity of the received history of Lei Feng on Weibo (M. Liu, 2012). Some expressed their skepticism about the authenticity of his diaries that contain circumstantial details about how he helped people and expressed his great spirit. For instance, many questioned how Lei Feng, "nearly illiterate," could have possibly composed voluminous diaries with literary flourish and flawless language.[4] Others doubted the authenticity of pictures shot by professional photographers of Lei Feng doing good deeds, even though he was still an obscure soldier.[5]

Among others, Ren Zhiqiang, a property developer and a Weibo celebrity with more than 35 million Weibo followers, leveled the following critique:

> As a tamed tool for class struggle, the image of Lei Feng has been established to meet the needs of the Cultural Revolution. After turning all citizens into screws that can be willfully placed anywhere, there is no need for democracy, human rights, or freedom [in China]. (Ren, 2012)

Ren's tweet was forwarded more than 27,000 times within 24 hours, with more than 10,000 comments, his argument resonating with most of the Weibo users' own reflections on "the ridiculous

[4] For instance, see the tweet by He Weifang, a law professor with more than 1.7 million Weibo followers (He, 2012).

[5] For instance, the tweet by Pu Zhiqiang, a well-known human rights lawyer, underlined that "one of the biggest lies of the last 60 years is Lei Feng. He hoodwinked me for two decades, actively pandering to his promoters, his diaries a collective creation. A monthly allowance of seven or eight yuan and he's making 100-yuan donations–either that's fiction or there's corruption involved. Back then, 30 million died from starvation, people my age might have taken a single photograph, and yet when he's up late at night studying Mao with a flashlight, there are people taking pictures! He left thousands of photos behind! Beijing police, if you want to arrest hidden forces, go arrest the hidden forces behind Lei Feng" (Pu, 2013).

brainwashing stories" from "the wretched propaganda campaigns" that they remembered, such as the one about Lei Feng.

Also in this process, many newly discovered photos of Lei Feng went viral on Weibo, showing a distinct image of Lei Feng from the official narrative. In one of the photos, for instance, the selfless communist soldier rode a motorcycle—a luxurious thing at that time—in Tiananmen Square. Criticism accordingly mushroomed, asking how Lei Feng, supposedly a lowly soldier and known for his frugality, could somehow afford a motorcycle unless he was either "corrupt and profligate" or part of false propaganda campaign by the authorities.

Similar to the incredulity over the authenticity of Lei Feng's stories, skepticism has raged on Weibo about the truth of the tales of several other historical figures, such as Huang Jiguang, who hurled himself against an enemy machine gun to block its fire; Qiu Shaoyun, who chose to silently burn to death to protect his unit's location; and Dong Cunrui, who sacrificed his life by detonating a package of explosives under an enemy's bunker (e.g., "Doubts," 2015; Yao & Yang, 2015). Some challenged the idea that Qiu's ability to remain silent while burning to death defies their understanding of human physiology. Others argued that Huang's story was fabricated because it was impossible to block bullets fired by a strafing machine gun with one's body. For Dong Cunrui, Weibo users believed that the improbable heroic deed was pure imagination because nobody saw it. This doubt and questioning of historical heroes' authenticity snowballed on Weibo, despite the government's effort to "authenticate the historical stories of these heroes" (Chen & Tan, 2015) by large-scale propaganda campaigns.

Findings and Discussions

In the debates over this particular historical event and these public figures, Weibo first provides a platform for individuals—be they eyewitnesses or not—to participate in narrating the past in different ways, which consequently contributes to an unprecedented level of openness in the process of social remembrance. Abundant historical materials that were previously either unavailable to the public or banned from publication because of the censorship—in particular, individual memories and experiences that have been unknown to people until now—finally came to light as the debate evolved. Second, as counter- and alternative frameworks for social memories, the articulation, dissemination, and aggregation of these materials emerge, develop, and proliferate on Weibo very quickly, with significant influence on society. These frameworks argue against, query, or satirize the official, orthodox frameworks for historical narratives, further generating and superimposing new historical knowledge. Third, the archiving and storage of these materials on Weibo also allow them to be easily retrieved and reactivated. In this way, the commemoration of the past is being continually produced, accessed, and updated. To summarize, Weibo cultivates the dynamics of social remembering as a crowd-sourced, continuous, accumulating, and sometimes temporarily dormant but reactivatable process, which shapes the commemoration of historical issues in Chinese society in the long run.

Engagement of Individuals in the Practice of Narrating the Past

In the age of mass media, forms of mass communication such as newspapers, magazines, and TV play a key role in the presentation and distribution of narratives of the past (e.g., Schwartz, 1991; Shapira & Wiskind-Elper, 1995). With the development of digital technologies, the emergence of weblogs allows witnesses of historical events to share their memories without depending on mass communication (in the case of China, see G. Yang, 2005; Zhang, 2012). Nevertheless, a specific cohort—the CR generation—remains the dominant group in articulating retrospective narratives of a specific period in history (e.g., CR memories; G. Yang, 2005, pp. 24–25). Different from digital media such as weblogs or bulletin board systems, microblogging social media platforms such as Weibo open opportunities for individuals to engage in narrating the past via various mnemonic practices (e.g., Keightley & Schlesinger, 2014).

In China, sites dedicated to the maintenance and (re)production of the historical past, such as educational institutions, museums, and mass media, have been monopolized by the party-state. This allows the authorities to claim to speak about the past in the voice of the nation, while leaving the ordinary person almost no space to speak up but only to accept and follow the official frameworks for memory. However, as studies (e.g., Hubbert, 2006; G. Yang, 2005) have uncovered, individual agents play a central role in negotiating mnemonic meanings and even engendering alternative interpretations of the past. In the cases here, similarly, a large number of individuals have involved themselves in various mnemonic practices of the historical issues on Weibo. More specifically, the participants in the debates include not only those who previously monopolized or had access to the narrative of the past, such as the government and its controlled mass media (via their verified Weibo accounts), but also people from all walks of life, whether they experienced these historical events directly or not. For instance, in the case of the Great Famine, both Weibo celebrities and ordinary users joined the debate by articulating, commenting, and distributing narratives, stories, memoirs, and numbers of deaths over the historical period to a wider scope.

Most important, this process characterizes the emergence and recognition of the individual narrative, memoir, and memory of the past, be it from a Weibo celebrity or from an ordinary person. In practice, the tweets embody the point that both celebrities and ordinary Weibo users and their family members—including those who experienced the Great Famine period but had never shared their experiences, stories, and memories with others as they did not have Weibo accounts or because they did not have Internet access—joined the debate as individuals, directly or indirectly, by speaking out about their personal memories. As Halbwachs (1992) stresses, "while the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is *individuals* [emphasis added] as group members who remember" (p. 22). These individual historical narratives introduce concrete human beings and their suffering into the commemoration of the past, which has been largely missing from existing (state-generated) narratives of the past (Zhao & Liu, 2015, p. 44). In this way, participation in the narration of the past on Weibo establishes a process in which individual memories and experiences, including those of suffering and loss, from those who survived the famine and those who died of starvation—that had never been included or mentioned in the official frameworks of national memory—have been recognized, communicated, and are now known by a growing number of people.

Similar situations occurred in the debates over the heroic historical figures, in which Weibo offers unprecedented opportunities for individuals to question, criticize, or satirize the official historical narratives. This process consequently breaks the regime's monopoly on the access to narratives of the past by acknowledging and integrating individuals' remembrances and mnemonic practices into the recollection of the past and by introducing and accumulating alternative and counterframeworks of memory against the official one.

Establishment of Counter- and Alternative Frameworks for Memories

The debates on Weibo engender the articulation, accumulation, and proliferation of alternative and counterhistorical narratives about the historical period and figures through crowdsourcing, with Weibo users voluntarily involving themselves in different kinds of mnemonic practices through various media texts.

Weibo allows its users to post and distribute information in various modes, such as text, photos, music, short videos, or a combination of multimodal contents. It is also possible to embed long-form content and links from other websites into the tweet. Tweets on Weibo, therefore, become content-rich, descriptive, and vivid. In practice, the technological affordances of Weibo enable its users to present and accumulate (e.g., by using hashtags) an abundance of historical materials covering the specific issue by crowdsourcing. As such, many of the historical archives and documentaries that were previously unavailable to the public have now been aggregated on Weibo and exposed to the public for the first time.

For instance, in the case of the Great Famine, historical materials, including the CPC's documents and archives, books that had been censored by the government (e.g., Dikötter, 2010; J. Yang, 2012), and overseas documentaries that people rarely encountered before, have recently been tweeted and diffused to a wide audience to the testify to the existence of the famine.

Among them, one of the most prominent materials includes stories from *Tombstone* (J. Yang, 2012). Uncovering a series of colossal tragedies, including instances of cannibalism and the continued systematic efforts of the CPC to cover up the history of the Great Famine, *Tombstone* has been banned in the Chinese mainland. Nevertheless, its influence has snowballed in the debate over the Great Famine on Weibo after people quoted or referred to the stories in it. For instance,

> @Huoshan Baiyang (Weibo nickname, verified as a journalist from Xinhua News Agency): I was born in the mid-1970s . . . so I did not have any experience with the famine deaths in the 1960s. But . . . I read Yang Jisheng's *Tombstone*. I believed in what they said. (see Xue, 2012)

Similarly, in the debates over heroic historical figures, Weibo users dug up and further tweeted lesser known texts, a majority of which have never appeared or been widespread in the media before. For instance, the image of Lei Feng on a motorcycle in front of Tiananmen Square immediately attracted extraordinary attention and distribution on Weibo, as the official narrative never associates Lei Feng with the concept of "luxury," as having a motorcycle in 1960s would have demonstrated.

Most important, the accumulation of these historical materials entails a fundamentally different narrative of the historical period and figures from this time that were provided by the dominant official discourse as the prescribed, authorized social framework of memory. The criticism and cynicism toward the official, orthodox—and previously hegemonic—framework accordingly emerged and were widely diffused.

For instance, the historical materials and archives crowd-sourced by Weibo users about the Great Famine not only highlight the enormous number 30 million as the population that suffered from starvation during the period 1959–1962, but also excoriate both the CPC's mistaken policy and the practice of holding back the truth about these mistakes made by the authorities. These narratives are significantly distinguished from the official discourse and the dominant memorial framework of the period, which, according to either the official chronicle of the CPC (Central Party History Research Office, 2011) or the historical textbook (History Section of People's Education Press, 2003, p. 109), never used the term *the Great Famine*. Instead, describing this period as the Three Years of Economic Difficulty or the Three Years of Natural Disasters, the official narrative of the historical period between 1959 and 1961 attributes the fact that approximately 10 million people were wiped out by starvation because of a series of unavoidable natural disasters and the Soviet Union's "perfidious" withdrawal of experts and technicians from China and its request for payment for its industrial hardware, which exacerbated an already difficult situation and sped up the loss of life (History Section of People's Education Press, 2003, pp. 109–110).

However, a totally different narrative of the period has been established on Weibo, with its users accumulating counter- and alternative narratives of the period against the official framework. For one thing, people aggregated alternative stories, memoirs, and memories either from their own experiences or from their family to testify to the actual existence of the famine, which had been denied by the authorities and questioned by Lin's tweet. These stories and memories, previously largely unknown to the public, had thereby been a relevant part of the proof of the famine and became known to more people. For instance,

> @Lu Gongmin (Weibo nickname): Between 1958 and 1960, my great-grandmother, seven people in my grandparents' generation, my aunt and my uncle, a total of ten people, starved to death, one by one, in Tongwei County, Gansu Province. (Yun'er, 2012)

> @Coding worker Zhao Ye (Weibo nickname, verified as a journalist): Just ended a call with my father, who mentioned that during the great famine period in the 1960s . . . there were over 100 people who died in our village . . . in Caohu Village, Anhui Province. . . . @Lin Zhibo If Director Lin is interested, I can bring you to my hometown and carry out some interviews. People aged 60 years old or older there all have similar memories [of the Great Famine] during that period. (Yun'er, 2012)

Moreover, Weibo users collected different materials to argue against the death toll in the dominant framework of memory, which admitted that only 10 million people starved to death (Central Party History Research Office, 2011, pp. 368–369). For instance, with more than 2 million Weibo followers, economist Mao Yushi proposed his way of accounting for the death toll and estimated that the

number would be 36 million (Yun'er, 2012). Ordinary Weibo users also offered statistics they read from academic and historical documents and demonstrated their opinions about the death toll. Xiyue Jianglang (Weibo nickname), for instance, presented the numbers raised by American Sinologist Basil Ashton and Ansley J. Coale, former chair of the Population Association of America. According to his tweet, Ashton estimated that there were approximately "30 million excess deaths and about 33 million lost or postponed births" (Yun'er, 2012); Coale believed the death toll to be 27 million. As more and more Weibo users participated in searching, posting, and forwarding various historical materials, they further aggregated into alternative and counterframeworks. Such frameworks not only greatly challenged the authorities' framework for memory by shaping the online debate, but also established the concept of the Great Famine, which gradually replaced the phrases "the Three Years of Economic Difficulty" or "the Three Years of Natural Disasters" in the later online survey.

Apart from the emergence of alternative and counterframeworks, the doubt and cynicism over the established historical narrative also force the authorities to revise the official narrative of the figures or to admit the shallow propaganda effort in those years. In the case of Lei Feng, the authorities modified the narrative of a god-like ideal after the photo of him riding a motorcycle in front of Tiananmen Square went viral and drew criticism on Weibo, albeit not fundamentally ("Doubts," 2015). Instead, they acknowledged that Lei Feng was also a fashionable young man, accordingly he "did almost all the fashionable things of his day," such as "wearing a fashionable leather jacket" and "riding on a borrowed motorcycle" ("Doubts," 2015) to take a photo—all of which are considered to be luxury items at the time. In the face of doubts about the authenticity of Lei Feng's impossibly squeaky-clean photos, the authorities admitted for the first time that some of the photos were posed shots (*bupai*) instead of scene photos, as they asserted previously (Wang, 2014). In this sense, Weibo entails a long-term influence on social remembrance and the framework for memory by facilitating the integration of newly emerging, crowd-sourced information from diversified subjects into the production of historical knowledge.

The Changing Mechanism of the Production of Historical Knowledge

The debate over the narrative of the past on Weibo, including the involvement of individuals who speak up about their memories, experiences, doubts, criticisms, and sense of cynicism toward the official historical narrative and the emergence of counter- and alternative frameworks against the once-monopolized official framework for memory, crystallizes a crucial influence of social media on society and politics in contemporary China. Social media such as Weibo empower people to organize contentious activities in contemporary contested events, but they also allow them to engage in various mnemonic practices, through which people (re)construct social memory and further shape the production of historical knowledge in the society. More specifically, social media entail the transformation of the mechanism of the production of historical knowledge from the following three perspectives.

First, social media embrace individuals in the production of the knowledge of the past by expanding opportunities for them to join in various kinds of mnemonic practices. Previously, the authorities monopolized the historical narratives of the past through, for instance, state-controlled mass media and other propaganda mechanisms. In this situation, individuals are but passive receivers who have to accept and follow the narratives and the official frameworks for memory. With social media, individuals,

with or without alternative memories that differ from the official story, are able to be active subjects of history and memory in commemorative activities; in this study, they spoke about previously unknown or lesser known memories and experiences, shared alternative and counternarratives, or questioned and challenged the authenticity of official stories. New knowledge of the past emerges and disseminates in this process, which consequently challenges, if not ends, the monopoly on the mechanisms of memory production held by the authorities.

Second, social media offer a platform to aggregate individuals' mnemonic narratives and practices into alternative and counterframeworks of the past. These frameworks not only challenge the hegemonic, official framework, but also encourage further participation of ordinary people into the process of social remembering. As Olick and Robbins (1998) argue, "groups can also use images of the past and struggles over history as vehicles for establishing their power or, perversely, lack of power" (p. 127). Following this argument, alternative and countermemories of the past serve as a political means—and in some case, facilitate political challenges—against the dominant power and its ideologically constructed history. In practice, as more and more social media users join the process of crowdsourcing and distribution, the accumulation of these memories and frameworks aggregates previously isolated, fragmented, or unorganized individual stories and experiences against the official framework, making participants recognize that they are not the minority with (officially) unrecognized memories in a society. This accordingly encourages more people to stand up and speak about their alternative memories and experiences. Moreover, as soon as these alternative and countermemories, discourses, and frameworks are diffused on social media, to ban or delete them completely becomes impossible, which allows more people to read voices that differ from the official one and, furthermore, to join the discussion and participate in these mnemonic practices. The engagement and aggregation of mnemonic narratives and practices on social media in the Chinese mainland hence have become an increasingly prominent issue, which differs from, for instance, the construction of collective memory in Hong Kong, where various social institutions, including school, family, and media, play complementary roles in transmitting the memory about the Tiananmen Square incident (e.g., Lee & Chan, 2013). In short, with the institutionalization of oppositional narratives (e.g., Pelak, 2015; Whitlinger, 2015) remaining unclear in the cases, the debates allow and further encourage previously silenced narratives in the face of oppressive histories to move from private to public spaces and to be acknowledged by the broader society, which raises critical consciousness and advances the struggle against historical hegemony.

Third, by storing and archiving historical materials, including the debate, in a digitally networked sphere, social media make them easily retrievable with the potential to be reactivated. More specifically, for one thing, people can easily search, retrieve, revisit, and reflect on the material. For another thing, the easy retrievability embeds the possibility to reactivate the process of narrating the past any time by reengaging people in the production of historical narratives.[6] In this way, the commemoration of the past is being continually produced, accessed, and updated. To summarize, Weibo cultivates the dynamics of

[6] In practice, the debate over the Great Famine was raised again in 2014, after Lanzhou University appointed Lin Zhibo as the dean of its journalism school. Weibo users immediately recalled the debate and posed strong criticism toward Lin, centering on his denial of the existence of the Great Famine and the deaths in that part of the Chinese history.

social remembering as a crowdsourcing, continuous, accumulating, and dormant but reactivatable process, which may shape the commemoration of historical issues in Chinese society in the long run.

Conclusion

The growing ubiquity of digital media has facilitated changes in political culture and power structures around the world. This study looks at the use of social media in the production of (alternative) historical knowledge and the (re)formation of social memory in contemporary China. By taking several contested debates over historical events and figures on Weibo as cases, this study demonstrates that social media embrace wide and diversified subjects to engage in the production of historical knowledge and facilitate the dissemination of alternative frameworks of memory as counterhegemonic discourse. The integration of fragmented, individual experiences and memories into the general historical knowledge and the facilitation of diversified mnemonic practices accordingly construct the social memory of the society.

The study suggests two implications. First, the widespread availability and accessibility of social media empower individual's mnemonic capacity by affording him/her with low-threshold access to "technologies of memory" (Armstrong & Crage, 2006, p. 745), through which individuals, as agents of commemoration, are able not only to speak about their memories, but, more important, to crowd-source historical narratives, aggregate diverse commemorative vehicles, and engage in sustained deliberation and public scrutiny for the enduring production of (contested) history knowledge. The production of social memory on social media thus differentiates from the one, for instance, on weblogs or websites that remains dominated by specific authors with topics that remain scattered throughout the Internet and are thus difficult to aggregate into special themes, as happens with Weibo. Instead, the mnemonic practices on social media embody an emergent production mechanism of historical knowledge that entails openness, collaboration, aggregation, reinvigoration, and sustainability.

Second, the debate over historical narratives entails an ideological tension between the authorities and their citizens in contemporary China, in which the collaborative production of contestation memories struggles against state-dominated collective misremembering, disremembering, and forgetting for the ideological shaping of the citizenry. While the authorities reinforce and reappropriate dominant historical narratives as part of their current governing strategy suited to the new ideological work and cultural governance, people voice their suspicions of, distrust of, resistance to, and challenges of the authorities and their ideological discourse by questioning, rejecting, and contesting the received historical narrative. In this sense, the debate exemplifies the specific construction of the past for use in the present (Jansen, 2007, p. 959), transcending what happened in history and memory, and shedding light on the complex political and cultural contentions that are ongoing in contemporary China.

Last but not the least, although this study provides some relevant points of departure for future research, its limitation concerns the issue of censorship, especially after the Chinese authorities recently tightened control to block material deemed subversive or socially unhealthy. Although the debates over the Great Famine and historical figures maintain on Weibo, the discussions on, for instance, CR or the Chinese student movement of 1989 remain highly banned subjects. A close examination of both censored

and surviving contents or accounts will give a more precise trajectory of the contingencies governing the control over social media and the changing boundary of the political sensitivity of topics in China.

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